

such, they do not appear to have been more corrupt than the secular tribunals. Contemporaries divide their abuse equally between the two. "Wycliffe might have been tempted to praise the lay lawyers and the lay courts at the expense of their traditional enemies and rivals, but he was too true a reformer to equivocate in this manner. He unsparingly denounced all lawyers and their procedure. Like the other writers of his day, he bore witness to their corruptions and extortions. They were, he said, the instrument of any villainy which great men wished to perpetrate. They helped them to oppress the poor, of whom Wycliffe was always a champion, sometimes to his cost.<sup>1</sup> In \* Piers Plowman ' the lawyers fare no better :—

Thou had bet meet a mist on Malvern Hills,  
Than get a mom of their mouth till money be them  
shewed.

Langland's bitterest description of the evils of his time and the triumph of corruption is that \* law is grown lord.' The jurymen of the lay courts, or \* sisors \* as they were called, and the officers of the Church tribunals, he condemns together as ' sisors and summoners/ the bond servants of ' Lady Meed/ the enchantress.<sup>2</sup> The lawyers and jurymen seem to have been notable for corruption in a corrupt age. The Commons stated that felons kept jurors to maintain them against honest men, much as a modern swindler is said in some countries to \* keep' a judge. Lollard writers declared that jurors would often forswear themselves \* for their dinner and a noble.'<sup>3</sup>

The Church courts, as law courts, were therefore no worse than the royal tribunals. They could have been reformed at least as easily as the Chancery Court. Indeed, after the Reformation there is no reason to think they were particularly corrupt; the acts for regulating their extravagant fees were really enforced when once the independent status of the Church had been broken by the Tudors. Until the nineteenth century their services in probate and divorce were retained as part of the machinery of the law.

The inquisitorial power of the Church courts  
over morals

\* *Matt.*, 234-7.      <sup>2</sup> *P. Pz.*, C, i. 163-4 ; A, iii. 279 ; C, xxii. 372.

« *Rot. Pcvrl.*, iii. 140 ; *Matt.*,  
183; *C. of J.*, 199-